

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2021 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven Asian and Asian American musicians. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Soo Yeon Lyuh

Dr. Soo Yeon Lyuh is a composer, improviser and haegeum player, born and raised in South Korea. She started taking piano lessons when she was three and performed as a soloist from the age of twelve. Lyuh later decided to learn the violin, but shortly after, she decided to quit playing music altogether. She started to pick up the haegeum as a hobby, but it ultimately became her passion.

While in her home country, she became a member of the National Gugak Center, the primary institution for learning Korean traditional music. Lyuh also started visiting the United States to merge Western instruments with the haegeum and work on pieces such as Fifty for the Future and Yessori. Lyuh is currently based in Princeton, New Jersey and attends graduate school for music at Princeton University.

In this interview, Dr. Lyuh shares her experiences with Korean traditional music. Lyuh discusses her musical background from learning piano and violin, as well as the characteristics of the haegeum. She details her collaboration experiences and her involvement with Western composers. Dr. Soo Yeon Lyuh also shares the improvisational process and what part of Korean culture resonates with her the most.

Oral History Interview Transcript: Soo Yeon Lyuh

Sydney Carlson: Hello everyone. My name is Sydney Carlson. And today you are listening to and watching an interview conducted for Ethno 20C: Music of Asia. I'm here with my colleagues Alice and Yetunde. And today we are interviewing Dr. Soo Yeon Lyuh for her musical career, and to learn about her life and her story. And I just wanted to say thank you so much for agreeing to be here with us today and speaking to us and we are really excited to learn from you.

Soo Yeon Lyuh: Hello everyone. I'm Soo Yeon. I'm so happy to be here and meet all of you.

SC: Alright. So to get started I kind of just wanted to ask a broad question. If you could just give us a brief musical background: just about your musical career, who you are, and what you do before we dive a little deeper.

SYL: Yes. So I am Soo Yeon Lyuh, and I'm originally from Korea. In 2015, I moved to Bay Area. Then, uh, this twenty-twenty-one summer, I moved to Princeton. And I first started to play

piano when I was three years old. And I briefly played violin when I was middle school student. Then I played haegeum over twenty years for now. And I was a professional haegeum, which is Korean two-stringed fiddle, player, and [played] professionally in Korea. And I was also a member of Gugak Center for twelve years. Then I came to UC Berkeley as a visiting scholar. Then I started to improvise with Bay Area experimental improvisers. Then I started to compose. Then I become a composer. So now, I just started my Ph.[D] program in Princeton University.

SC: Wow! Well that is an amazing plethora of accomplishments that you've done musically. Just diving back into your childhood. Do you have a formative childhood experience when you were learning music? And also does family, or did your family specifically, play a big role in helping you learn music?

SYL: Yeah, actually my parents are not musicians, but they love music. So that's why I could play instrument when I was really young then. My mom was always very supportive. And when I first started to play piano I was pretty good. Then I always wanted to play the violin. And when I first played the violin, I immediately felt, Oh this is my instrument, because I really like to control the shape, and pitch, and vibratos. Then when I met haegeum, Oh my god, this is mine! Because, you know, a haegeum doesn't have a finger fret. I really can control and make very wide vibrato, and also the timbre is really plaintive. So it was...just clicked.

SC: Yeah well that sounds like an amazing learning experience. I think Yetunde has a couple more questions for you about the instrument specifically, and your learning process.

Yetunde Shekoni: Yeah. So you talked a little bit about how you play piano and then violin. So I was wondering, did any of those instruments help you in learning haegeum, especially the violin, because you know it's a string instrument as well?

SYL: Yeah. To use a bow, of course, it is very helped [helpful]. But also the haegeum's bow is loose. I have to make control, like make tension with fingers. So it's very different, and it's really hard to get just a pure sound. But because I first started to play the western instrument, and I could have a perfect pitch, so it was really really helpful. Because since I am more focused on new music, which is composed for me—so I premiered over one hundred pieces so far—and then I read music pretty well. And then because the Korean traditional music, especially court music and folk music, we don't use equal temperament, so the pitch relation is very different. So because I first played western music, it is really helpful, especially when I work and collaborate with western instruments.

YS: And also could you talk a little bit more about what separates haegeum from other instruments. I know you were saying how it doesn't have frets? (What else?)

SYL: Yeah. It doesn't have finger fret and also it has only two strings. And strings are made of twisted silk, so it is very flexible. So I can reach, sometimes, almost just by squeezing with the same fingering, almost an octave, which means I can make really, really wide vibrato. And the range is pretty very wide. So it almost has the same range as a viola. (Laughs) Yeah.

Alice Deng: I actually have a question kind of related to this. Because I know a lot of us are not very familiar with traditional Korean folk or court music. So I was wondering if you can talk more about the concept of “playing by ear” in traditional Korean music?

SYL: Um-hm. Oh yeah. “Playing by ear” is literally just playing by ear. And especially the folk music was orally transmitted. We didn’t have any scores. So, just, you learn from your teacher, and then you, yeah, mimic and follow your teacher. But these days we [the music] are all transcribed. So, traditionally, like *sanjo*—the Korean traditional solo music genre—it should be improvised, but not really improvised anymore because we transcribed all the melodies, and students memorize, and we exactly play same melodies.

AD: Talking about improvisation, can you describe what improvisational methods you use in Korean traditional music, like what kind of structures are the improvisations based on?

SYL: Do you mean the improvisation of my music, my improvisation, or traditional improvisation music?

AD: We can talk about traditional [music] first, and then, yeah, we’ll definitely...[move on to your music]. We are very interested in your compositions as well.

SYL: Okay. Sure, sure. So the Korean traditional music, we have two different genre: *Chong-ak* and *Minsog-ak*. The *Chong-ak* means *court music*; it’s not improvised music. Then, *Minsog-ak* is more improvisation. But we have specific rhythmic patterns. And we use pentatonic scales. So there is a freedom, but still we have a structure. So usually, it starts from slower rhythmic patterns and getting faster. So usually the *sanjo* consists of four different *Jangdan*—rhythmic patterns—*Jinyang*, *Jungmori*, *Jungjungmori*, *Jajinmori*. And then my improvisation. When I first start improvisation 2015, because my (___?) and my background is Korean traditional music, and I try to use a lot of Korean traditional music elements. But since I collaborated with a lot of experimental musicians in Bay Area, and I learned and tried new extended techniques which I’ve never done in Korea. For example, I did overpressures, or, circular bowing, harmonics, *pizzicato*, and over-the-bridge *pizzicato*, and those kind of things I’ve never done before. So, umm, actually, yeah, I feel like my musical, especially the improvisational musical palette got expanded.

AD: Thank you so much for sharing. Since we are talking about you as a composer now, can you briefly talk about how you started composing? What is your process of composing? And what are things that inspire you to compose?

SYL: Um-hm. Before I started this Ph.D. program in Princeton [University], I never thought I could become a composer because I’ve never trained and studied composition. But twenty-sixteen summer, I first met David Harrington from Kronos Quartet. And then the first meeting, he asked me to improvise, and then I improvised, and then he just said, “Oh you are a composer. You didn’t realize it”. Then he commissioned me a piece. So my very first composition method was improvisation. It was a pure improvisation. I didn’t write down anything. And I just brought haegeum to recording studio, and then ten-minute improvisation, five times overdubbing. So I transcribed it later on for haegeum and string quartet. So, yeah, my composition process still is

very heavily reliant on my musical background, which is Korean traditional music. But I try to expand it more and more. Because I'm in the program now, so I got exposed to new genres, new techniques, and new composers.

YS: Could you also talk more about collaborating with other western musicians? What has your experience been like with them?

SYL: Oh yeah. So when I was in Bay Area, I could give a workshop to a lot of graduate students, composers. So I collaborated as a performer with the composer. And I learned... actually, yeah, I taught about haegeum because most of them wanted to write for haegeum. And most of them are not familiar with haegeum, so I had to give a workshop. Then they found some new, like, extended techniques: what I use these days. Actually, they kind of found it and taught me. So I learned some new techniques from them, and then I also taught about haegeum. So it was kind of really the exchange each others. So I really enjoyed the collaboration. Then, when I went to *Bang on a Can Summer Festival*, I got exposed to a lot of new musics. And I could find the potential of haegeum, like I played John Cage's music—some like really avant garde music I've never thought haegeum can do it before. Then I started to give a show with the western music ensembles. Then, of course, the Kronos Quartet, we collaborated. So far we have three pieces premiered together. And then also we are working on *Trilogy*, which just the first one was premiered this year. And we have two more pieces. So basically, I share my Korean traditional music background, and then they also... Yeah I can learn from them a lot of new music, composition, and improvisation.

SC: Wow! Well thank you so much for sharing your compositional process with us and your collaboration experiences. This is all really fascinating to hear. Now, knowing this now, I kind of want to ask you a more abstract question. As you being a composer and innovator in experimental, how do you define music? And how do you think that your musical experience has shaped how you define music?

SYL: Yeah, first of all, music for now: it is truly emotional outlet for me, especially during the pandemic 'cause I collaborated, I keep working, making music; it really helped me. Especially the [piece] titled *Moment Twenty-two [meant to say Moment 2020]*. And I composed, I mean, I composed and then I performed with Kronos Quartet. And that piece, it was...we haven't really met each other. We were on all the different...even I was in Korea. They were in their places. I could, yeah, really connected with them without physically being in the same room. Especially that, I don't know if you guys have a chance to see that piece, but the very ending, was...Originally I wrote for a very big ending. But for the recording session we got so exhausted, especially I was in Korea, it was almost 4 a.m. in the morning. And I was so exhausted. And then they asked me, 'Oh Soo Yeon, do you need any more sound?', and I said, 'Oh yeah, can you guys record sigh sound?'. And then [they asked] 'What do you mean?', and then I just demonstrate, you know like a (exhales). Because, you know, I really wanted to share my emotions at that moment with other people. And they said, 'Oh, of course'. So without even I give the cue sighs, they started to sigh like forty times. Like (demonstrates sighing). And, it became a new ending. I really liked it. Everytime I watched the music video, I really liked the ending. That is my best spot for the whole composition. So, something like that... 'cause I really

want to use my music to connect with other people. And, yeah, that's why I define music as an emotional outlet, for me.

SC: I totally agree with you, and I really resonate with that moment, of how just those shared moments of just like emotional...it's just so raw. And you feel so connected playing with other musicians. I totally resonate with that as well. Kind of going now to your culture, like how your music and your culture intersect. I wanted to ask: as an Asian musician living in the United States, do you ever find it difficult to share a listening space for your music, for Asian music, in the United States within the rest of the musical genres. And why, or why not?

SYL: I think I am fortunate, lucky enough to give a pretty decent opportunities to share my music to the audience. And, um...Yeah, but it's hard to compare (laughs). Because honestly I don't know how is that different...other musicians, or I haven't checked with other genres, or musicians. But for me I think, because there are not many traditional Korean musicians in the United States, so I am pretty busy (laughs), to cover whole country from Hawaii to New York, and California, so I feel really fortunate. And the reason why I decided to become or keep composing is I found out I can reach to more audience through my composition. And when I try to share traditional music, it was even for me, and for Korean audience in Korea, to us, it's still very difficult. Because it is very well preserved. That means it is really hard, and difficult to understand for us. But through *Yessori*, my first composition for Kronos. When David commissioned this piece, he just asked me, "Oh Soo Yeon, we want to learn Korean traditional music through your piece." So, then, when I...The piece is performed every year these days, not only in the United States. And then I found out, Oh this is the way I have to do. And then I can make...It still has all the Korean traditional elements, like the first movement is based on the court music, the second movement is based on the folk music, and there is improvisation sections. So, because I give a lot of, like, workshops, and even I taught haegeum to foreigners and Korean people, but it take a lot of time, and it's really hard. But teaching Korean music through my piece was very, I found out, much easier. Because, for example, the violinist who played the *Yessori*, they already play their instrument, familiar instrument, which is violin, right? Then I can explain just the subtle nuances, and vibratos, and the pitch shiftings, then they understand easier, and they learn quickly. So, yeah.

SC: Okay. I was actually going to ask something kind of similar to what you already were beginning to dive into. And that is; what do you think the best way to introduce this type of music to people who may not have listened to it before, or unaware of Korean music tradition. In your opinion what do you think is the best way to introduce it, either in the classroom, or just one-on-one?

SYL: Well my experience as a teacher, it was much easier for me to make the right, I mean, contemporary textbook music for them. Yeah, that's why I keep on working to make pieces based on Korean traditional music. But like otherwise, like all other music or genres, just keep listening the traditional music will really helpful. It's like learning language, other language. Um-hm

SC: Yeah, I agree that. Listening and keeping your ears open to anything new is definitely key. Okay, and we're coming to our final couple of questions here. I wanted to ask you: besides the music, obviously, what part of Korean culture resonates with you the most and why?

SYL: (laughs). You mean culture?

SC: Yeah, just anything that, you know, you find very significant in Korean culture. Something you hold true to yourself. It can be as personal or as broad as you want. I'm also Korean as well, so I'm also really curious to hear what you think.

SYL: Umm...well...(laughs) Can you count Korean food as well?

SC: Absolutely! (laughs)

SYL:(laughs) Yeah. I...When I need inspiration, I really need Korean food. And I even take a train to New York City. And other than that, I think 'cause we Korean take family really—I know that...I believe all other cultures as well—but, you know, 'cause we are very close and family-oriented culture. So, my inspiration is a lot of from my family members, and, yeah, from my family. So actually the *Trilogy*, my first piece is—I worked with my son, and he wrote the text. And then the second one is my grandpa's story, who is ninety-two years old. And the third one will be my great-great uncle who lived a hundred years ago in this country. So something like that, 'cause it is always, can be very inspirational. And then my music is all...come from, yeah, my family.

SC: That is very touching that your family plays such a big role in your music first-hand. That's amazing. And, before we close out, I just wanted to ask you if there is anything else you would like to share about your musical experience or otherwise? Also if you have any projects in the works that you haven't already mentioned and would like to mention, now is your time. Just wanted to give you one last chance.

SYL: Well, yeah, I'm so happy being here in the United States. And then the K-pop music is really become a big thing all over the world. And then, yeah, I think it's time for Korean traditional music as well. So I will keep working hard, and please pay attention to us (laughs). And please find the beauty in Korean traditional music. And hope to meet all of you in-person soon with the beautiful music.

SC: That was very sweet! And with that, that concludes our interview with Dr. Soo Yeon Lyuh. Thank you so much again for coming. This was a really enriching experience.